

# A Big Idea . . .

(description)

## **Provides a "conceptual lens" for prioritizing content.**

A Big Idea refers to core concepts, principles, theories, and processes that should serve as the focal point of curricula, instruction, and assessment. Big Ideas reflect expert understanding and anchor the discourse, inquiries, discoveries, and arguments in a field of study. They provide a basis for setting curriculum priorities to focus on the most meaningful content.

## **Serves as an organizer for connecting important facts, skills, and actions.**

Big Ideas function as the "conceptual Velcro" for a topic of study. They connect discrete knowledge and skills to a larger intellectual frame and provide a bridge for linking specific facts and skills. A focus on these larger ideas helps students to see the purpose and relevance of content.

## **Transfers to other contexts.**

Discrete facts do not transfer. Big Ideas are powerful because they embody transferable ideas, applicable to other topics, inquiries, contexts, issues and problems. Because we can never cover all the knowledge on a given topic, a focus on the Big Ideas helps to manage information overload. Big Ideas provide the conceptual throughlines that anchor a coherent curriculum.

## **Manifests itself in various ways within disciplines.**

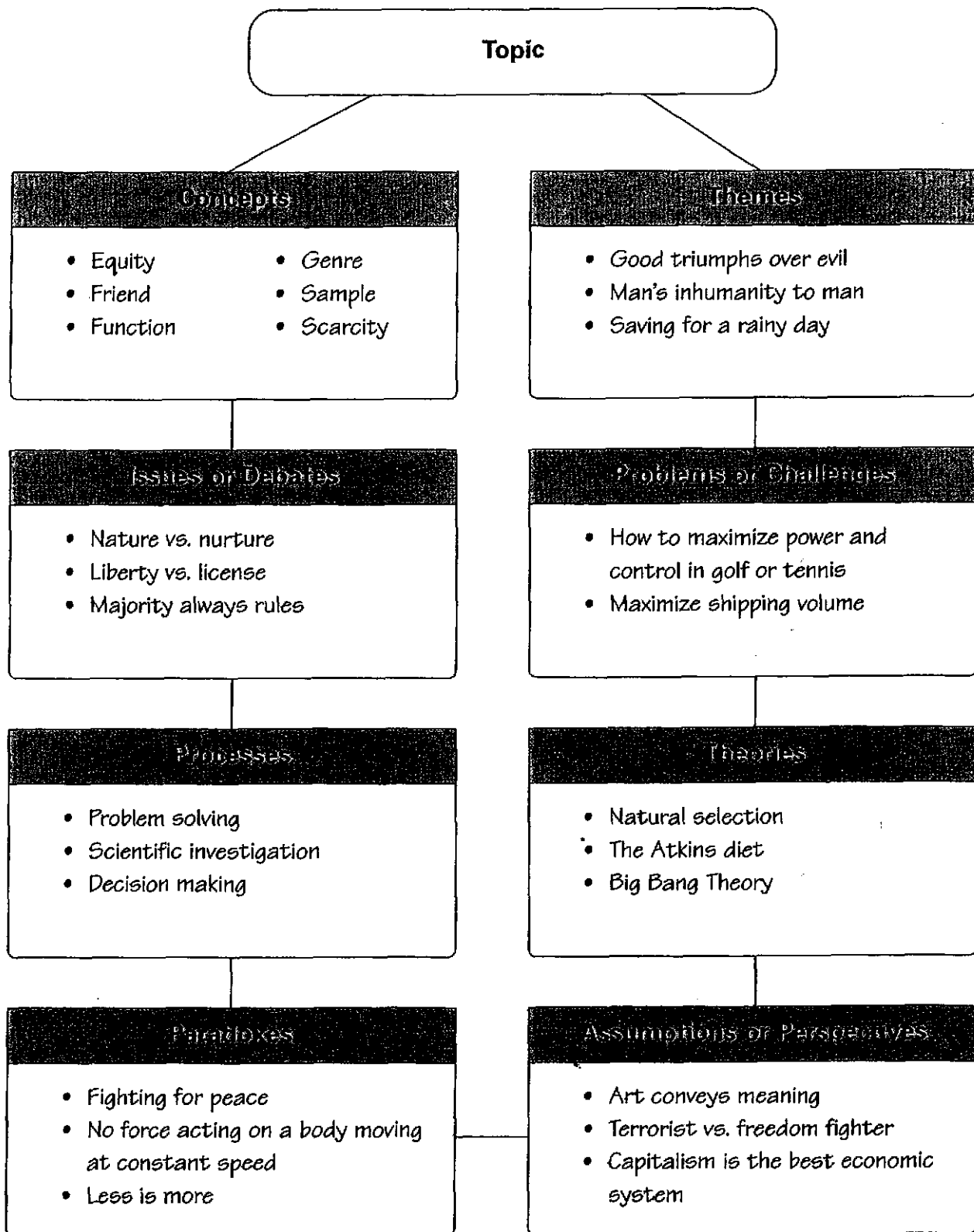
Big Ideas are typically revealed through one or more of the following forms: a core concept (e.g., adaptation), a focusing theme (e.g., man's inhumanity to man), an ongoing issue or debate (e.g., conservative vs. liberal), a puzzling paradox (e.g., poverty amidst plenty), an important process (e.g., writing process), an authentic problem or persistent challenge (e.g., illiteracy, voter apathy), an illuminating theory (e.g., Manifest Destiny), an underlying assumption (e.g., the markets are rational) or differing perspectives (e.g., terrorist vs. freedom fighter). Additional examples of these Big-Idea categories are provided on the next several pages.

## **Requires uncoverage because it is an abstraction.**

A Big Idea is inherently abstract. Its meaning is not always obvious to students, and simply covering it (i.e., the teacher or textbook defining it) will not ensure student understanding. "Coverage" is unlikely to cause genuine insight; understanding must be earned. Thus, the idea must be uncovered—its meaning discovered, constructed or inferred by the learners, with the aid of the teacher and well-designed learning experiences.

# Big Ideas Manifested

Big Ideas typically manifest themselves in one or more of the following forms.



Templates  
Stage 1  
Stage 2  
Stage 3  
Peer review  
Exercises  
Project activities  
Assessment

# From Topics to Big Ideas

Topic:

Nutrition

## Concepts

- Food groups
- Overweight

## Themes

- A balanced diet
- You are what you eat

## Issues or Debates

- Value of synthetic vitamins
- Safety and effectiveness of various diets

## Problems or Challenges

- Balancing taste with good nutrition
- The lure of fast food

## Processes

- Research
- Scientific inquiry

## Theories

- Various diets that promise weight loss
- Diet affects longevity

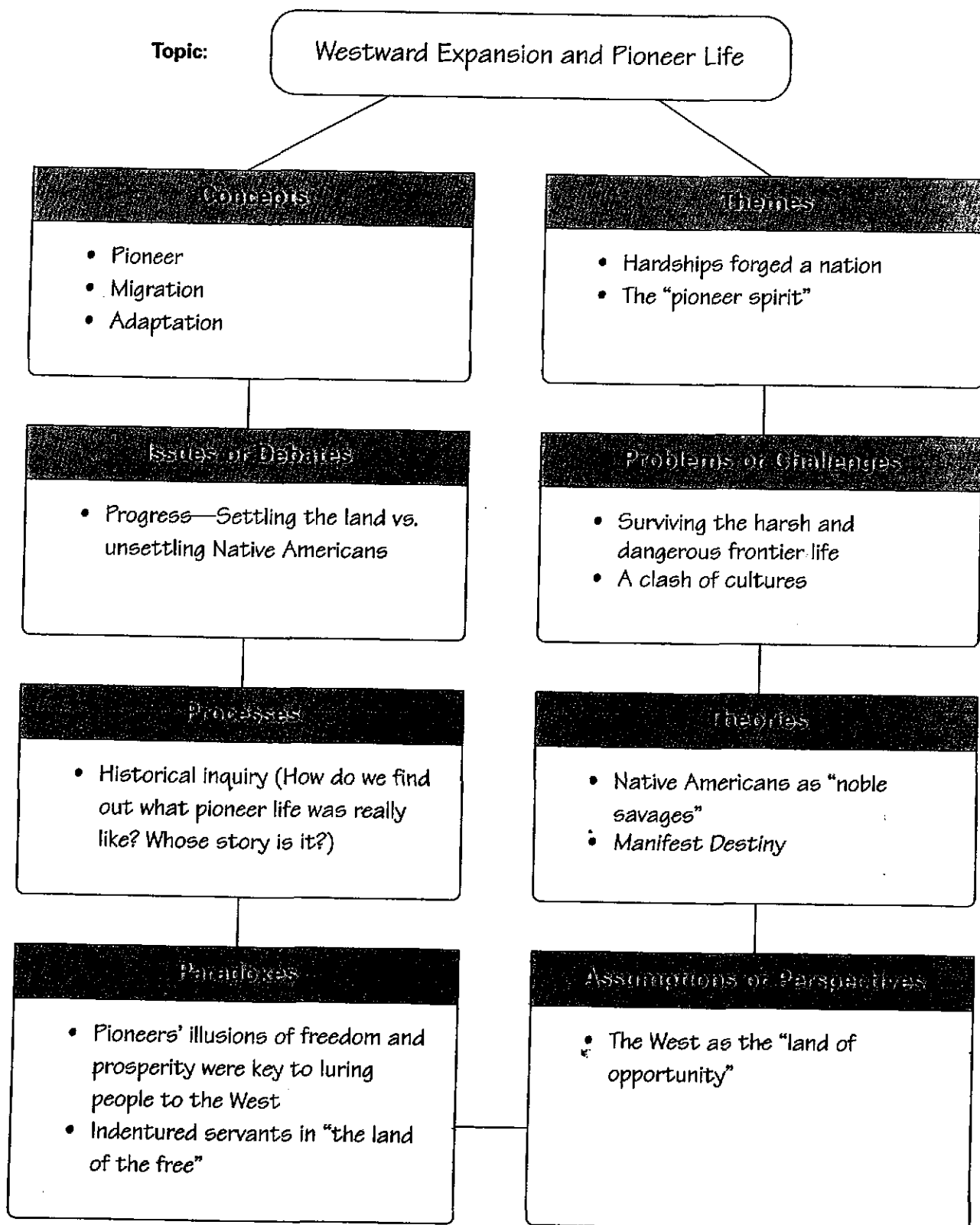
## Paradoxes

- The prevalence of nutrition-related health problems despite all of the available information about healthful eating
- A healthy diet for one person may be unhealthy for another

## Assumptions or Perspectives

- The USDA Food Pyramid defines healthful eating
- Vegetarians are healthier than meat eaters

## From Topics to Big Ideas



## Essential Questions—Samples (continued)



### History

- Whose story is it? Is history the story told by the winners?
- What can we learn from the past?

### Literature

- What makes a great book?
- Can fiction reveal truth? Should a story teach you something?

### Mathematics

- When is the “correct” answer not the best solution?
- What are the limits of mathematical representation and modeling?

### Music

- How are sounds and silence organized in various musical forms?
- What roles does music play in the world?

### Physical Education and Athletics

- Who is a winner?
- Is pain necessary for progress in athletics? (“No pain, no gain”)

### Reading and Language Arts

- What makes a great story?
- How do you read between the lines?
- Why do we punctuate? What if we didn’t have punctuation marks?

### Science

- To what extent are science and common sense related?
- How are “form” and “function” related in biology?

### Technology

- In what ways can technology enhance expression and communication? In what ways might technology hinder it?
- What are the pros and cons of technological progress?

### Writing

- Why write?
- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?
- What is a complete thought?

# Essential Questions

(description)

*Have no simple "right" answer; they are meant to be argued*

Essential Questions yield inquiry and argument—a variety of plausible (and arguable) responses, not straightforward facts that end the matter. They serve as doorways into focused yet lively inquiry and research. They should uncover rather than cover the subject's controversies, puzzles, and perspectives. They are intended to result in conclusions drawn by the learner, not recited facts. For example, Does art reflect culture or help shape it? Can we look but not see? Why do "seers" see what the rest of us don't? Does the artist see more clearly or look elsewhere?

*Are designed to provoke and sustain student inquiry while focusing learning and final performance*

Essential Questions work best when they are designed and edited to be thought provoking to students, engaging them in sustained, focused inquiries that culminate in important performance. Such questions often involve the counterintuitive, the visceral, the whimsical, the controversial, the provocative. For example, Is the Internet dangerous for kids? Are censorship and democracy compatible? Does food that is good for you have to taste bad? Why write? Students develop and deepen their understanding of important ideas as they explore these questions.

*Often address the conceptual or philosophical foundations of a discipline*

Essential Questions reflect the most historically important issues, problems, and debates in a field of study. For example, Is history inevitably biased? What is a proof? Nature or nurture? By examining such questions, students are engaged in thinking like an expert.

*Raise other important questions*

Thought-provoking Essential Questions are naturally generative. They lead to other important questions within, and sometimes across, subject boundaries. For example, In nature, do only the strong survive? leads to What do we mean by "strong"? Are insects strong (since they are survivors)? What does it mean to be psychologically strong? Inquiries into human biology and the physics of physiology also follow.

*Naturally and repeatedly revisited*

The same important questions are asked and asked again throughout one's learning and in the history of the field. For example, What makes a great book great? Are the Harry Potter novels great books? These questions can be productively examined and reexamined by 1st graders as well as college students. Over time, student responses become more sophisticated, nuanced, well-reasoned and supported as their understandings deepen.

*Subvert view, ongoing reasoning, or big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons*

Essential questions challenge our unexamined assumptions, the inevitable simplification of our earlier learning, and the arguments we may unthinkingly take for granted. They force us to ask deep questions about the nature, origin, and extent of our understanding. For example, In light of fractions, place value, irrationals, and negative square roots—what is a number? Is it "democratic" to have an electoral college? What IS a friend? Can the enemy of my enemy be my friend? What is a story, if a story has no clear plot or moral? Is history more of a story than a science? What are the implications for studying history, if so?

## Types of Questions

### Overarching Questions

These questions point beyond the particulars of a unit to the larger, transferable Big Ideas and enduring understandings. Practically speaking, the specific topics, events, or texts of the unit are typically not mentioned in the framing of overarching questions. For example, Is science fiction great literature? is an overarching question for any unit on a specific text such as *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

### Topical Questions

These questions are subject- and topic-specific. Topical questions frame a unit of study. They guide the exploration of Big Ideas and processes within particular subjects. For example, What aspects of *Stranger in a Strange Land* are plausible? guides inquiry within a specific literature unit. This unit question links to the overarching question, How "true" is a fictional story? This question is addressed within other English and Language Arts units.

### Samples

#### Art

- In what ways does art reflect culture as well as shape it?
- How do artists choose tools, techniques, and materials to express their ideas?

#### Unit on masks

- What do masks and their use reveal about the culture?
- What tools, techniques, and materials are used in creating masks from different cultures?

#### Literature

- What makes a great story?
- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?

#### Unit on mysteries

- What is unique about the mystery genre?
- How do great mystery writers hook and hold their readers?

#### Science

- How does an organism's structure enable it to survive in its environment?
- How do organisms survive in harsh or changing environments?

#### Unit on insects

- How do the structure and behavior of insects enable them to survive?
- How do insects survive when their environment changes?

#### Mathematics

- If axioms are like the rules of the game, when should we change the rules?

#### Unit on the parallel postulate

- Why is this an axiom if it's so complex?
- What no longer holds true if we deny it?

#### History and Government

- How do governments balance the rights of individuals with the common good?
- How and why do we provide checks and balances on government power?

#### Unit on the U.S. Constitution

- In what ways does the Constitution attempt to limit abuse of government powers?
- Does separation of powers (three branches of government) create a deadlock?

# Drafting Essential Questions

## Reading and Literature

Q

Overarching Essential Questions	Adapt these questions or generate new ones
<p>What makes a great book or story great?</p> <p>What is the relationship between popularity and greatness in literature?</p> <p>Is a "good read" always a great book?</p>	
<p>Why read fiction?</p> <p>Can a fictional story be "true"?</p> <p>What is the relationship between "fiction" and "truth"? Is historical fiction a contradiction?</p>	
<p>What is a story? How are stories from other places and times about me? Must a story have a moral?</p> <p>Must a story have heroes and villains?</p> <p>Should a story or fairy tale teach you something?</p>	
<p>Why read? What can we learn from print?</p> <p>Can all of our experiences be put into words?</p> <p>Does literature primarily reflect culture or shape it?</p> <p>To what extent is written text conservative and to what extent dangerous?</p>	
<p>What do good readers do?</p> <p>What do they do when they don't understand?</p> <p>How do texts differ? How should I read different types of texts?</p>	
<p>What is the author saying? How do I know?</p> <p>What is the gist? What is the main idea?</p> <p>How do I read between the lines?</p> <p>How do I know I am getting the point and not merely imposing my views and experience?</p>	
<p>From whose viewpoint are we reading?</p> <p>What is the author's angle or perspective?</p> <p>What should we do when texts or authors disagree?</p>	
<p>What's new and what's old here?</p> <p>Have we run across this idea before?</p> <p>So what? Why does it matter?</p>	

Stage 1

Stage 2

Stage 3

Peer review

Exercises

Resources

Glossary



# Drafting Essential Questions

## History and Geography

Q

		Overarching Essential Questions	Adapt these questions or generate new ones
Historical Analysis and Interpretation		<p>Why study history?</p> <p>What can we learn from the past?</p> <p>How am I connected to people in the past?</p> <p>To what extent is history different from the past?</p>	
		<p>How do we know what happened in the past?</p> <p>What can we legitimately infer from artifacts?</p> <p>What should we do when primary sources disagree?</p> <p>Who do we believe and why?</p> <p>Whose "story" is it?</p> <p>Is history inevitably biased?</p> <p>Is history the story told by the "winners"?</p> <p>Who were the "winners" and who were the "losers" in any historical event?</p>	
		<p>What causes change? What remains the same?</p> <p>How do patterns of cause and effect manifest themselves in the chronology of history?</p> <p>How has the world changed, and how might it change in the future?</p> <p>Is it always true that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it?</p>	
Geography		<p>Why is "where" important?</p> <p>Why is/was _____ located there?</p> <p>What makes places unique and different?</p> <p>What defines a region?</p> <p>How do a region's geography, climate, and natural resources affect the way people live and work?</p> <p>How does where I live influence how I live?</p> <p>Why do people move?</p>	
		<p>What story do maps and globes tell?</p> <p>How and why do maps and globes change?</p> <p>How do maps and globes reflect history?</p>	

# Drafting Essential Questions

## Government and Politics

Q

Overarching Essential Questions	Adapt these questions or generate new ones
<p>Who should govern or rule?            Should the majority always rule?            Why do we have rules and laws?            Who should make the rules and laws?            Is it ever OK to break the law?            To what extent should society control individuals?            How do governments balance the rights of individuals with the common good?            What are "inalienable rights"?            Should _____ be restricted or regulated?            (e.g., immigration, alcohol/drugs, media)            When? Who decides?</p>	
<p>How do the structures and functions of government interrelate?            How do different political systems vary in their toleration and encouragement of change?            How do politics and economics interrelate?</p>	
<p>How do personal responsibilities and civic responsibilities differ?            Can an individual really make a difference?            What are the roles and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy?            What is a good citizen?            How do citizens (both individually and collectively) influence government policy?</p>	
<p>What is power? What forms does it take?            How is power gained, used, and justified?            How can abuse of power be avoided?            Is a two-party system best?</p>	
<p>What constitutes a great leader?            Are great leaders made or born (nature or nurture)?</p>	

Government and Politics

# Drafting Essential Questions

## Economics and Culture

Q

Templates

Stage 1

Stage 2

Stage 3

Stage 4

Stage 5

Stage 6

Stage 7

Stage 8

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